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ABSTRACT

The interpersonal communication courses at the University of Washington have adopted the use of experiential learning strategies in response to the changing student population and changing attitudes. A major goal of the program is to provide a solid, explicit academic foundation for the use of experiential strategies by (1) outlining the epistemological rationale for experientialism, (2) linking specific experiential activities, and (3) integrating with each experiential activity a "processing" discussion designed to help students generate "theoretical generalizations." A second goal is to deemphasize psychological constructs and to focus on communication. A conceptual shift from viewing listening as reproductive to viewing it as productive makes it easier for students to experience what it means to be "present" to the other. Rather than doing their creative thinking individually and then using group time to synthesize, students are encouraged to use talk itself to solve problems. A communicative approach to this set of learning skills not only responds to the current students' pragmatic, less self-centered orientation, but also puts communication teachers in the position of doing what they do best. (HTH)

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VINTAGES FOR CHANGING TASTES:

EXPERIENTIAL STRATEGIES IN INTERPERSONAL COURSES

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VINTAGES FOR CHANGING TASTES: EXPERIENTIAL STRATEGIES IN INTERPERSONAL COURSES

As John Cagle may well remind us, practice and application have traditionally been a part of public speaking education almost, as we say, "since Aristotle." But that hasn't always been called "experiential learning." That term, and the instructional strategies it refers to, have been most closely associated in our field with interpersonal communication instruction. In fact, experiential learning has been a part of interpersonal communication teaching since its beginnings in the 1950's and 60's.

One might even argue that the greatest successes and the greatest failures of interpersonal communication instruction are due to its use of experiential learning. On the one hand, departmental enrollments grew, numbers of undergraduate majors increased, and bright graduate students were attracted to the field in part because of the opportunities for significant, even profound, learning that existed in experientially-oriented interpersonal communication courses. Students have been encouraged there not only to theorize about such inherently salient topics as self-awareness, disclosure, listening, and conflict management, but also to experience ways to improve all those aspects of their communication. On the other hand, some students, perhaps even in the same classes, have been moritified by the inappropriate intimacy and superficiality of some experiential activities. Colleagues and administrators have also complained about the lack of intellectual rigor in these "show and tell" or "touchy-feely" classes. If you'll pardon the mixed metaphor, experiential learning has been interpersonal communication's hallmark and its achilles heel.

Currently the interpersonal part of our discipline is changing in some ways that affect its employment of experiential learning strategies. As everyone here realizes, the "me" decade is well behind us and students are interested less in self-awareness and more in preparing themselves to be employed members of society, preferably of the upper-middle class. Enrollment in many interpersonal courses has decreased as more students register for public speaking, interviewing, and organizational communication classes.

Research in interpersonal communication has grown in similar directions. Fewer studies focus on intrapersonal communication, self-awareness, and disclosure and more on network relationships and effects of cultural variables. One might say

that as this part of our field matures, we are studying less psychology and more communication.

A second change is the increasing maturity of students in our courses. This change is due in part to demographics; as the mean age of the U.S. population increases, we encounter more older students. In addition, the economic pressures wrought by the recession of the late 1970's and early 1980's led many students to focus less on the luxury of developing self-awareness and more on the necessity of preparing for gainful employment. As our student population matures, the principles of androgogy or adult learning become increasingly applicable to interpersonal teaching. We know from the work of Knowles, Ingalls, and others, for example, that the adult learner brings several distinctive features to the learning situation. Adult learners generally have a self-concept that is more autonomous than dependent, an interest in using their experience as a learning resource, a readiness to learn that grows out of individual interests rather than external grouping, and a focus on problem-centered rather than subject-centered learning.[1] Each of these qualities or characteristics has implications for the teacher. For example, because they see their experience as a rich learning resource, adult learners are often more open to experiential strategies. On the other hand, they are especially impatient with "high school-ish" activities, and currently available text materials make it difficult to respond to the adult learner's interest in problem-centered rather than subject-centered learning.

I believe that our use of experiential strategies in interpersonal communication courses ought to be responsive to both the historical development and the current context in which we find ourselves. We have tried to do that in the basic course program I coordinate at the University of Washington and in the upper division interpersonal course I teach. I want briefly to outline our efforts here so that you may find some ways to translate our choices into suggestions that fit your program.

Academic Grounding

One goal of our program is to provide a solid, explicit academic foundation for our use of experiential strategies. This is part of our attempt to recognize the movement out of the 'me' decade and to respond to the maturing concerns of our students. We work toward this goal in three ways: (1) by outlining the epistemo'ogical rationale for experientialism, (2) by linking specific experiential activities, whenever possible, to research programs with which they are consistent, and (3) by integrating with each experiential activity a "processing" discussion which is

designed to culminate in a list of student-generated "theoretical generalizations."

Epistemological Rationale For a number of years now, several of us who teach in our program have been pleased by the positive impact of a second-day-of-class discussion of what we call knowledge-about or analytic knowledge and knowledge-of or experiential knowledge. As I point out when I lead this discussion, this distinction between two kinds of knowledge is not new with me. In his recent book, Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, Richard Rorty traces the distinction to Aristotle and notes how a number of western thinkers have used it to talk about how we come to know. Rorty says that for Aristotle, "knowledge of" is "knowledge as a relation between persons and objects rather than persons and propositions."[2] This experiential way of knowing is prior to "knowledge that."

On the first part of his influential book Analyzing Social Settings, the sociologist John Lofland makes the same distinction between what he calls "knowing about" and "knowing." As Lofland puts it,

> To know about a category of human beings is to have it represented by second parties that such a category exists. We can know about Hottentots, Russians, presidents, delinquents, hippies, or whatever through television, face-to-face reports, and other mediated means. But we can also know people through our own direct, face-to-face association with them, extending over some significant period of time.[3]

William Howell discusses essentially the same distinction in his Empathic Communicator under the headings "learning about" and "learning by doing."[4]

In my classes I explain the distinction between knowledge-about or analytic knowledge and knowledge-of or experiential knwoledge in order to clarify for my students that I want our work together to include both. Analytic knowledge is important because it leads to generalizations that allow us to take learning out of the here-and-now of the classroom; as we develop analytic knowledge we also hone our critical thinking abilities and our abilities to distinguish between good and bad, strong and weak ideas. But knowledge of is also important. Personal experience is the foundation for everything we know really well. We don't learn to ride a bicycle, downhill ski, parent a child, or manage subordinates just by reading books or outlining ideas. We don't really know any of those things unless and until we do them.

I also point out that this focus on both kinds of knowledge makes this course different from others they have taken. Most of their other courses in history, philosophy, political science, and psychology focus primarily on analytic knowledge.

On the other hand, our focus on experience makes this class analogous to those in the laboratory sciences.

I try to emphasize the point that when we use structured experiences, simulations, role playing,or other activities, we are simply applying an insight that philosophers have recognized for centuries: there are at least two basic ways to learn, and we are more likely to succeed if we use both.

I use this discussion as a rationale for the course requirement concerning involvement or participation, and I design my examinations and assignments to tap both kinds of knowing. For example, I ask that their prospectus for their final project highlight the knowledge-of and the knowledge-about components of their plan, and I look for a balance between the two. By the time we are 3 or 4 weeks into the term the students are using the distinction themselves to talk about the various parts of the class. The distinction seems to make sense to them and it places our experiential work into what I find to be a very useful context.

An additional benefit of this distinction is that it gives me a solid footing to stand on whenever I have to defend experientialism to a skeptical colleague or administrator. This distinction also provides a way to respond to the needs of the adult learner without explicitly saying, "We know you mature learners are interested in problem-centered learning and we're trying to give it to you."

Research Links A second way we try to academically ground our use of experiential strategies is by linking them, whenever possible, to related research programs. I'm sure many of you make this same move, so I won't spend a great deal of time talking aobut it. I do want to emphasize, though, the importance, when we do this, of preserving the experience. Too often, it seems to me, the efforts to link an experiential activity to research succeed in 'academizing' the life out of the activity.

Let me use just one example to indicate how I think you can preserve both. Like many of you, I have sometimes asked my basic course students to bring to class an object that represents some aspect of how they see themselves. I often use this activity as an introduction to the disclosure unit, and it usually eventuates in some appropriate sharing and a significant increase in group cohesiveness. It can also be awkward and uncomfortable. Students sometimes respond to the discomfort of risking with references to the "show and tell" exercise and some contributions are trivial or silly.

None of that has happened since I started linking that activity to some of the language-and-thinking and brain bilaterality research. Here is basically how I proceed: I introduce the activity by talking first about how language is consciousness' main mode of sense-making, that is, that we are continually working to make sense out of the world and talk is the primary way we do that. Some research by Brenda Dervin and her associates is developing this "sense-making" model of communication.[5]

I then talk a little about the common differences between left-brain and right-brain information processing and talk. I note that even though it is an oversimplification, we can talk about the propositional and digital language of the left brain as contrasted with metaphor, the language of the right brain. Then I develop the notion of metaphor, contrasting our current understanding from the limited meaning most of us get in literature classes. Ideas from Paul Ricoeur's The Rule of Metaphor get worked in here.[6] I talk about the prevalence of metaphor and, as illustrations I use Joyce Hocker and Bill Wilmot's insightful discussion of the metaphors people use to talk about conflict[7] and Gerry Philipsen and Tamar Katriel' discussion of the "work" metaphor that is part of our meaning for a personal relationship.[8] I point out that metaphors significantly strengthen description by (a) providing for a compact characterization, e.g., "conflict is a battle," (b) enabling us to describe unnameable or ineffable details, e.g., "My love is a red, red rose," and (c) allowing us to make descriptions very vivid, e.g., "My arm feels like lead."

Then I suggest to the students that metaphors about their selves can develop and reveal aspects of self-understanding more efficiently and effectively than almost any other kind of talk. And in that context, I ask them to try an experience of right-brain, metaphorizing thinking and to bring to class a metaphor for some aspect of how they see themselves.

When we put this experiential activity in this research-related context, we seem to be able to preserve its felt impact and yet protect it from silliness or trivilization. There are obviously many ways you can apply this same approach to activities in your classes.

Theoretical Generalizations A third way we work to academically ground our use of experiential strategies involves our approach to processing activities. Here we draw heavily on what Jody Nyquist calls instructional discussion.[9] Building on her work with Laura Crowell, Jody has developed an approach to classroom discussion which integrates instructor pre-planning and spontaneous student responses. The basic idea, as I translate it, is that if the instructor knows the material

well, he or she can use questions and probes to move a group toward the same kind of systematic, organized idea-development that a lecture uses statements to accomplish. In other words, if you prepare carefully and appropriately, you can guide a spontaneous classroom discussion in such a way that students produce, in their own words, virtually the same major and sub-points that you would explicate if you were using a lecture to cover the material.

It is not easy to do this well. As Jody points out, the instructor needs to be able to avoid "switchboarding" and to create various types of questions to tap the various levels of student response--e.g., memory, translation, interpretation, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.[10] The instructor also needs to be able to use various probes to encourage students to develop their ideas and to build on one another's responses.[11] It is possible, however, to create an outline of such a discussion that functions like a map: the instructor works as a facilitator or guide as he or she moves with students along a thoughtline.

In my classroom, instructional discussion works basically this way: I plan an activity designed to increase the probability that students will experience, for example, aspects of the relationship between risk and trust or some of the differences between critical and interpretive listening. Then I outline the activity and, before they begin, I try always to ask, "Do you understand what I'm asking you to do?" After they have completed the activity, I first ask, "What did you notice?" I listen carefully to what they say, because their response to that question tells me where in my instructional discussion plan I can actually begin my questioning.

Then I ask questions to guide the group's thinking roughly along the lines I have planned. When they come up with a better way to move toward the same goal, I try always to take it. At each point along the way where we reach a key idea, I write that insight on the board, in their words. When this works, we end up with a set of organized statements on the board which could have been an outline for my lecture on the topic. But there are two important differences: the ideas are in <u>their</u> words and they reflect <u>their</u> experience.

It doesn't always work that way, of course. But instructional discussion is for me a very effective way to combine experiential activities with focused content development.

<u>De-Psychologizing</u>

Our second major form of response to the current context is to deemphasize, whenever possible, the emphasis on psychological constructs and to focus on communication. I realize that simply to state the issue that way raises the hair on the

back of the necks of many persons in our field who want to deny that there's any real difference or at least to continue to exploit the complementary relationships between the two fields. But I think there are some compelling arguments to be made for distinguishing between psychological and communicological approaches to human beings and for suggesting that this field's scholars and teachers ought to focus on doing what we do best. My colleague Gerry Philipsen is one person who effectively articulates this view. As he puts it, "Although speech may not embody or manifest all human behavior, communicative conduct or talk is an entirely adequate resource for the explanation of all shared meaning and all coordinated action."[12] In other words, although human motives and meanings are undoubtedly important, they are just as undoubtedly inaccessible. This field's scholars and teachers can profitably remember, however, that motives and meanings are fully embodied in the talk that appropriately constitutes our exclusive data base. I briefly addressed some of these issues in an essay on intra- and interpersonal communication a few years ago,[13] and the symposium on empathic listening in the October 1983 Communication Education is the most recent experession of the position I am outlining.

The primary point of Ron Arnett and Gordon Nakagawa's contribution to that symposium is that a psychological approach to listening creates at least as many problems as it solves. As they point out, difficulties arise "when one's assumptive premise about the origin of communicative understanding is rooted in the internal matrix of the person."[14] For one thing, in this psychologizing approach, "selves" get reified into entities that need to be looked for and possessed. In addition, it becomes easy to reduce listening to a series of manipulative techniques.[15] Finally, as a number of communication scholars have found, our attempt to explicate listening from this psychological standpoint leads us to ground the process in a fiction; namely, the belief that one person can "lay aside" her own views in order to contact the world of the other. I argue in that symposium that it is preferable to treat listening communicatively, that is, to focus not on the process of reproducing psychological states but on the ways we produce understanding in talk between us. I suggest that openness, play, linguisticality, and the fusion of horizons are four concepts from philosophical hermeneutics that can inform this communicative or interpretive approach to listening.

We have just begun to clarify how this interpretive approach to listening works itself out in the classroom. We are finding, though, that the conceptual shift from viewing listening as reproductive to viewing it as productive makes a difference to students. For example, it becomes easier for them to experience

what it means to be present to the other, and we are working on identifying verbal and nonverbal responses that enhance presentness.

"Keep talking" or "say more about that" is one of them. If I view listening as a process of co-creating a text between us, I am less likely to rush toward inferences about your psychological state and more inclined to encourage both of us to elaborate the text we are building. This is part of what it means to develop understanding in talk as contrasted with looking for it behind what someone says.

Teachers can also encourage students working in groups to see their conversation as the group's primary creative resource. Rather than doing their creative thinking indiviudally and then using the group time to synthesize it, they are encouraged to use talk itself to solve problems and develop approaches.

For the purposes of this panel, my main point is that there is an important difference between the experience of co-creating meaning in talk and the experience of inferring psychological states. We are finding that a communicative approach to this set of skills not only responds to the students' pragmatic, less self-centered orientation but also puts us as communication teachers in the position of doing what we do best.

Conclusion

At the University of Washington our approach to interpersonal communication continues to include a strong commitment to experiential learning. How we live out that commitment is changing in response to changes in our students' expectations and our own understanding of what we are about and how this field can best approach its subject matter. We believe that both our explicit academic grounding of experiential learning and our efforts to de-psychologize our courses have had a positive impact on our program's development.

NOTES

[1]John D. Ingalls, A Trainer's Guide to Andragogy, rev. ed. (Waltham, Mass: Data Education, Inc., 1972); Malcolm S. Knowles, The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species (Houston, TX: Gulf Publ., 1978).

[2]Richard Rorty, Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (Princeton, N.J.: Prineceton University Press, 1979), p. 142.

[3]John Lofland, Analyzing Social Settings (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1971), p. 1.

[4]Wm. S. Howell, The Empathic Communicator (Belmont, CA: Wasdworth, 1982), pp. 13ff.

[5]Brenda Dervin, "Communication Gaps and Inequities: Moving Toward a Reconceptualization," in Progress in Communication Sciences, II, ed. B. Dervin & M. Voigt (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex, 1980); Cf. Brenda Dervin et al., "The Human Side of Information: An Exploration in a Health Communication Context," in Communication Yearbook 4, ed. Dan Nimmo (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books-ICA, 1980), pp. 591-608.

[6]Paul Ricoeur, The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language, trans. Robert Czerny (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978).

[7]Joyce Hocker and William Wilmot, Interpersonal Conflict, 2nd ed. (Dubuque, Iowa: Wm. C. Brown, forthcoming).

[8]Tamar Katriel and Gerry Philipsen, "'What We need is Communication': 'Communication' as a Cultural Category in Some American Speech," Communication Monographs, 48 (1981), 301-317.

[9]Jody Nyquist, "Instructional Discussion," in the Instructor's Resource Guide for Together: Communicating Interpersonally, 2nd ed., by John Stewart and Gary D'Angelo (Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley, 1980).

[10]Ibid., pp. 27-30. Cf. Jody D. Nyquist, "The Instructional Discussion Method," unpubl. ms., Center for Instructional Development and Research, University of Washington, 1979; and Richard L. Carner, "Levels of Questioning," Education (1963) 546-550.

[11]Nyquist, "Instructional Discussion," p. 36.

[12]Gerry Philipsen, personal conversation, November 2, 1983

[13]John Stewart, William W. Wilmot, and Tim A. Hopf, "Intra- Interpersonal Communication: A Trialogue," The Communicator 1 (1979), 1-9.

[14]Ron Arnett and Gordon Nakagawa, "The Assumptive Roots of Empathic Listening: A Critique," Communication Education, 32 (1983), 371.

[15]Ibid., 372-373.